

St. John's Episcopal Church

Jackson, Wyoming

Sermon for February 15, 2015 ~ Last Sunday After Pentecost

The Reverend Ronald D. Pogue

The Episcopal Church in Jackson Hole has entered a time of transition between the departure of one rector and the arrival of another. I have the privilege of being your temporary shepherd during this time. Your wardens, vestry, and other parish leaders along with Bishop Smylie, Canon English, and the diocesan staff have extended generous hospitality, for which Gay and I give thanks.

I have been invited to join you in this stage of your journey because I am a transition specialist. This time of transition is a rare opportunity for you to remember where you have been, to clarify who you are at this point in history, to strengthen your leaders, to reinforce your connections with the wider Church and community, and to prepare to commit to a new era of fruitful mission with a new spiritual leader. My primary mission is to guide you, support you, and encourage you as you do those things.

Transitions are often daunting. But the truth is, we all have experience with transitions. The longer we live, the wiser and less anxious most people are when faced with change. There are exceptions, of course. I recall the story of a reporter who was interviewing a man celebrating his 100th birthday. The reporter said, "Mr. Smith, you've lived a very long life. I'll bet you've seen a lot of changes." And the man replied, "I sure have sonny, and I've been against every one of them."

Our faith is supposed to help us during times of transition. So, when the transition has to do with our faith, it takes on added dimensions. That's why we will work so diligently during these months together to draw from the depths of our spiritual resources in this particular time of passage.

In truth, the story of our faith is the story of transition, change, and transformation. Even a brief encounter with the sacred texts that inform and shape us bears that out. In the beginning, we read of the transition from nothing to everything, from darkness to light, from innocence to disobedience. There is God's call to Noah and his family and to Abraham and his descendants to leave what was and to make the transition to what is to be. There is Jacob whom God transforms into Israel through years of exile and soul-searching. There is Moses whom God calls to lead the children of Israel from captivity to freedom and all the details of their resistance to the changes required to live in that freedom. There is Joshua who is saddled with the task of making a nation of these people. There are accounts of kings and prophets who worked with our ancestors in faith through times of transition. Central to the message of Jesus is the call to repent – *metanoia* – turn, change, gain a new perspective and a new life, be transformed by God at work in your lives. The first disciples were minding their own business when Jesus called to them, "Follow me." The Risen Christ encountered Saul, persecutor of the early Church, on the Road to Damascus and transformed him into Paul, Apostle to the Gentiles. Change leads to transition, which then leads to transformation.

Today's readings in particular are examples of how transition is the norm in the story of faith we that has been handed down to us. In Elisha's response when Elijah was taken up by a whirlwind into heaven (2 Kings 2:1-12) and in the response of the disciples when they saw Jesus in a new light on the Mount of Transfiguration (2 Kings 2:1-12) we see that times of change are opportunities for epiphanies. When the transitions of our lives cause us to lose our grip on what is familiar and comfortable and we aren't sure where to turn for help, we are humbled by the powerful presence of our Creator God, Jesus our Great High Priest, and the Sanctifying Holy Spirit. In that openness, wonder, and humility, we advance on our spiritual journey together. "For it is the God who said, 'Let light shine out of darkness,' who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ" (2 Cor. 4:6).

So, today, I invite you to engage with one another, with your Bishop, with the wider Church, and with me as we walk together in the journey of transition. It will not always be easy. There will be changes that we don't understand or like. There will be new faces, different ideas, and unfamiliar procedures. Sometimes we will stumble and fall. Sometimes we will rise in triumph. We'll have to learn new languages. We'll have to listen more carefully and speak with greater thoughtfulness.

But it will be exciting for those who approach the journey with a spirit of adventure, trusting in God and one another. And, most of all, Love Divine, living and active among us, will continue to mold and shape us into the new creatures God wants to have in this place in the future. That will be our source of the courage, the hope, the creativity, and the patience that will be required. As we journey together, let us remember that it is not really about us. It is about God. It is not about our limited resources or our limited perspectives. It is about the abundant resources of our bountiful God and God's vision of a creation redeemed and restored. The God who has led this far will continue to lead so that God's reign will come and God's desires will be accomplished on earth as in heaven. The Church doesn't have a mission; the Mission has a Church! We are the delivery system.

The lesson for us is, that the things we do in prayer and discernment for the sake of this congregation's future will in large part determine the future, so after the new rector is here it will be important to remember this time and the spiritual underpinnings it holds.

Like those we read about in the Hebrew Scriptures during their times of transition in the life of the People of God, like the twelve disciples trying to understand the transition from their former lives to the role of apostles, like the Apostles in the transition involving passing the mantle to the next generation of Church leaders, we turn to God, having grieved the departure of a pastor and friend, giving thanks for the good things that were accomplished under his leadership, humbly acknowledging our need for divine resources to lead us through this time of uncertainty into the future God has in mind, and asking for those things that will glorify God and build up this community of faith for the work that lies before you.

The people of St. John's have been entrusted with an amazing heritage. Your leadership in mission in this community and, even more so, as the leading Episcopal congregation in this state, matter in uncommon ways. As Jesus said to Peter when Peter was in the midst of a personal epiphany, "From everyone to whom much has been given, much will be required" (Luke 12:48).

Each time you enter this house of worship, I hope the water in the Baptismal Font will be a reminder of why you came back – to give thanks for the gift of Baptism. And, each time you leave, I hope it will remind you that what has happened to you here is all about what lies beyond those doors. Those doors open outwards into the mission field at our doorstep into which we are sent at the end of each service. We are called out from the world in order to be nourished and fortified to be sent back out to be light, leaven, and salt as we continue the incarnate mission of Christ in our day.

Divine Wisdom dwelt in all its fullness in the One who is our Host today at the banquet we are about to share. Wisdom and grace at this table are as abundant as the waters of your rivers and lakes, as packed with energy as the fossil fuels beneath your soil, as strong as mountains that rise above these plains, and as generous as the hospitality you extend to your guests! As we gather to receive this gift, we will be united as an authentic community of faith and nourished for the roles we are to play and the work we are to do in the days ahead. Then, we will be sent out to make a difference – THE difference God wants to be brought about specifically by God's trusting people who are known as The Episcopalians, for the sake of the world for which our Savior Jesus Christ gave his life.